No. 32

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"I believe in fair play, Miss Desmond," he interrupted. "You were an innocent party and I could not let you assume the shame that should have fallen on the shoulders of another."
R. of M. G., No. 32.

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CARTER, the outlaw, stood before Guy Fillmore and Ruth. He had just been told that he was a murderer, without a human instinct in his dirty body. Guy had put all his pent-up feeling in his words as he addressed the outlaw, who plainly showed by his face that he resented the insult.

"Well, I am not so sure about that," he said with meditative plaintiveness. "Doesn't my coming back here mean anything to you? Do you suppose I would travel night and day and risk my life to clear a woman who wasn't worth clearing? If your wife was what you think her to be, I'd never come back to defend her."

Guy Fillmore shrugged his shoulders.

"Strange that you did not hold such lofty sentiments when you caught her and dragged her around for two days and nights," he replied. "What sort of an explanation can you offer to that?"

Carter evidently was at a loss what to say. The hand which held the revolver dropped listlessly to his side.

The weapon hung there from his hooked forefinger, swung by the trigger-quard, like a bird with a broken wing. Again he studied the woman.

"I guess," he began at length, "I was thinking more of my own neck than what I was hooking on to her. It did not come home to me, what I was costing her, until I woke up to the fact that there was something finer in her than in any other woman I have ever known.

"When I released her and told her to go back to you, I realized what a frightful position I had placed her in. I knew what you thought. I am being hunted like an animal because I killed a skunk who had no right to live. And for your benefit I am going to tell you the story."

The outlaw pointed to a mossy spot to the left.

"You might as well be seated there and be comfortable," he said.

"I am very comfortable standing," Guy Fillmore returned gruffly. "And I don't care to hear your story."

Carter grinned.

"Then I'll tell it to your wife," the other said quietly. "I will in all likelyhood be a dead man within the next hour, for my chance to escape is gone. I threw it away when I decided to come back and clear her."

As he uttered the last words the outlaw dropped on the ground. Fillmore remained standing as did Ruth.

"In this country I am called the killer," the outlaw resumed, "because I shot a man who deserved to be killed. The two others had a chance for their lives in a fair duel. And I would never have become a murderer if they had played fair with me.

"I was the assistant boss of a construction gang, working on the Canadian-Pacific Railroad. The man to whom I was answerable came from Montreal. He came with a bad reputation.

"It was said of him that men did not trust their wives and daughters into his company. I heard also that he had been sent out here to keep him out of trouble with women.

"Bailey—which was his name, was a handsome man with city manners. He knew what to say to please the fair sex. But none of us suspected that he was a rotter.

"He always treated me square, and I had no special reason to dislike him. What his past had been, did not concern me. I was perfectly willing to judge him according to his conduct of the present.

"Like most all men, I fell in love with a woman. She was an unusally young girl, the daughter of an old friend. I was about the happiest man in all the world

when she consented to marry me.

"She proved to be a good companion and a tender, loving wife. It was a pleasure to come home to her at night.

"When I seemed tired and somewhat discouraged, she would sit on my lap, and in a short time made me forget the hard knocks of the day. How I loved her, only God and I knew.

"A few weeks later Bailey was made the boss of the gang. I was one of the first to congratulate him.

"One day when we were not working far from home, my wife brought my noon lunch. It was then that Bailey met her for the first time. While she was present he never took his eyes away from her.

"After that, Bailey developed a sudden liking for me and insisted that I go out with him. Not knowing at the time what kind of a skunk he was, I felt gratified that he should pick me for a bosom chum.

"Of course, I invited him to our home. After a few of his visits I noticed that my wife seemed to take pains in dressing.

"She always looked her best when Bailey came. When I spoke to her about it, she laughed. She told me that I had absolutely no reason to feel jealous.

"My wife was not much different from other women, I suppose. She enjoyed an occasional compliment. But she had always been clean. It seemed though that Bailey had misconstrued her frequent smiles.

"He took them as a sign of encouragement. One night I had a date with him. There was to be a poker game at the home of a mutual friend.

"Bailey failed to show up. I thought that his failure to come was due to the fact that he had been called away suddenly by the superintendent of our section. This had happened before.

"I will never forget how uneasy I felt that night. About twelve o'clock I cashed in my chips and went home. As I fumbled for the latchkey, I noticed that the door stood partly open. This was unusual for my wife always kept it securely locked whenever I went out at night.

"I had scarcely entered when I heard someone sobbing. The sounds came from our bedroom. Instantly I felt that something terrible had happened. And I was not mistaken.

"My wife was lying face downward on the bed. At first she refused to speak. Finally she sobbed out her story.

"Bailey had come while I was away. There were red marks on her throat which showed how brutally he had handled her. Everything went black about me.

"The most horrible thing about it all was, that my wife was to become a mother. The shock threw her into convulsions, and she died a few hours later.

"There was only one thought in my mind now. Bailey must die. I might have gone to his home and killed him, but I wanted to give him a chance for his life.

"I sent word to him that I would shoot him on sight. He sent a reply that he was ready for me.

"We met in a lonely road some distance from our camp. Although he had the first shot at me which wounded me in the arm, I killed him by drilling him through the head.

"Then I made the worst mistake of my life. Instead of staying and facing the consequences, I fled into the mountains.

"The police were sent out to capture me. I was fiercely determined that they should not take me alive. I was ready to shoot it out with them.

"The first duel was with odds against me. Two

of them tried to corner me. I killed one and wounded the other.

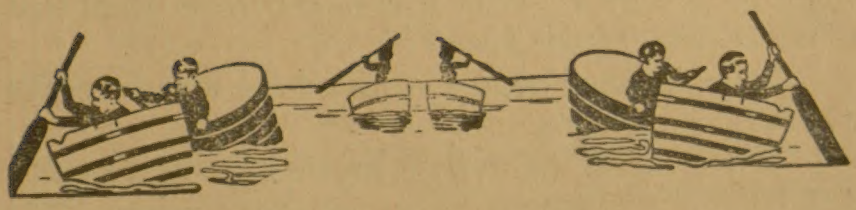
"At the next clash I was again victorious. With three murders to my credit, the entire Canadian Mounted was put on my trail. Like a hunted animal I fled before them.

"And then I stumbed across this woman here," indicating Ruth. "Well, what happened after that you already know. But I want you to know that no harm came to her. My only reason for coming back here was to square her with you."

Guy Fillmore stood motionless. The expression in his eyes was that of frank incredulity.

He seemed unconscious of his wife's movements as she edged away to where the rifle lay. His gaze rested on the outlaw.

"You believe me, don't you?" the latter pleaded.



Chapter 103

"THEY HAVE KILLED HIM!"

GUY FILLMORE'S attitude told that he did not believe a single word of the other's story. Part of it might be true, he was willing to admit grudgingly, but not the episode involving Ruth. He did not think that a man of the Carter type could treat her with respect.

Having had her to himself for two long days and nights was enough to condemn her utterly in his eyes. Very slowly he shook his head.

As he did so he noticed that his wife had recovered the rifle, which she held against her body, the stock caressed by her armpit and the barrel pressed close to her knee.

"Well, if you don't believe me," the outlaw spoke again, "I have just one thing to say. If that is the case, your wife is a damned sight too good for you. She is as straight as an arrow. What you ought to get right now is a bullet through your head."

"That is about what I expect from a coward like you!" Fillmore snarled.

"Wait!" cried the woman, moving forward swiftly and shouldering recklessly in between the two men. "He knows now," she proclaimed as she pressed close beside her husband. "You know now, don't you?" she implored Guy. "What more is there to be said?"

Then Guy Fillmore felt the cold steel against his hand.

It chilled him into quietness. He became reasonable enough to let his fingers twine about the rifle barrel.

"Yes, I know now!" he asserted, scarcely conscious of the words he was uttering. For speech, at the moment, was nothing more than a smoke screen to hide his intention.

With the quickness of the trained hunter he brought the rifle to his shoulder, the muzzle within six inches of the outlaw's breast.

"Now I've got you!" he gasped. "Don't move or you are a dead man!"

The outlaw's laugh seemed an indifferent one.

"You've got the drop on me alright," he exclaimed, still laughing, "but before you try to shoot, I want to tell you just one thing. I see that your pretty young wife is still loyal to you.

"She went over there and got that rifle so you could kill me with it. She thinks a damned sight more of you than you deserve. Are you going to shoot?"

"I am!" replied Fillmore grimly.

"Then there is another thing I want to tell you," Carter went on, "We are not all just white or just black in this world. We have both colors mixed up in us. You are flirting along the edge of the killer class yourself right now, only you are not cautious enough."

"What do you mean by that?" the other demanded.

"I'll tell you what I mean," said the outlaw, grinning. "I pulled the teeth out of those shells before I gave them back to your wife. I drew the lead bullets and took the powder out. Being hunted, you see, somewhat spoils your faith in human nature. I just couldn't afford to take a chance."

"That's a lie!" snarled the man with the rifle.

"Then shoot!" challenged Carter.

The shoulder behind the gun-grip promptly braced itself for the shock. The finger on the trigger com

pressed.

There was the thin snap of metal against metal, but nothing more. No explosion came, and no bullet sped forth on its mission of death.

Guy Fillmore swore viciously.

Twice more he pulled the trigger and each time only a harmless snap resulted. Then he swung the rifle around, evidently intending to use it as a club.

Ruth, who had been watching the procedure with wide eyes and a frantically beating heart, suddenly uttered a cry of fright.

The outlaw had swiftly placed his revolver against her husband's breast.

She saw the murderous expression on his bearded face. He meant to kill her husband. With one leap she was at his side.

"Don't kill him—don't!" she gasped, clinging to Carter's arm.

He looked down upon her pityingly, and for a moment their eyes hung on to each other.

"You love that husband of yours and he isn't fit to tie your shoe laces," he said in a quiete tone. "I was going to drill him, but I won't because you ask it."

Guy Fillmore had fallen back a step, his features ashen. He had seen the depth of his own grave yawning before him. But he had seen more than that. The realization that he had been a fool rushed over him.

This outlaw—this killer whom the entire Canadian mounted police sought was no ordinary criminal. It took a brave man—a man with a noble character to do what he had done.

And now he believed every word Carter had spoken. He had carried Ruth with him so that she would not betray his presence in that section of the forest to the police.

If he had harmed her, he would never have risked his life to come back there and clear her. With an impulsive motion Fillmore extended his hand, but the other disregarded it. There was a cold smile on his face as he said:

"Get in your tents, both of you. This is the end of the circus. And the next time don't be so ready to condemn your wife."

The last sentence was addressed to the young husband. As the last word left the outlaw's lips, he backed away, instantly on the alert.

Step by step he retreated until he disappeared in the underbrush.

Then a long moment of silence followed. Guy and Ruth had emerged from their tents. She came toward him and he took her into his arms.

But before he could say a word a shot rang out in the early evening stillness. It was followed by three more. The young wife flattened against her husband shudderingly.

"Oh, they have killed him!" she breathed.

"I am afraid so," Guy retorted without looking at her.

A few moments later an officer of the mounted police came out of a thicket. From one hand he trailed a rifle, held by the muzzle.

In the other hand he held his hat, with his finger thrust through a bullet-hole freshly torn in its crown.

"I got him!" he said with a laugh made hard and harsh to hide his agitation. "Got him with my second shot," he repeated as he stared down at the hole in his hat crown, "through his dirty black heart."

Guy Fillmore could not trust himself to speak. He stared at the officer with an expression in his eyes that spoke volumes. In his tent he went, leading Ruth by the

hand.

The officer muttered something that was not exactly complimentary to the couple, then turned and strode away.

For a long time Ruth and Guy sat in silence. Although twilight had begun to gather, he could see her hands twitch as they lay folded in her lap.

He also saw the tears that chased one another down her cheeks. With a bound he was at her feet.

"Ruth—Ruth!" he cried, in the throes of an overwhelming emotion. "I have been a fool. Can you forgive me?"

As he buried his dark head in her skirt, she caressed his hair.

"Of course, I forgive you, dear," she answered sobbingly. "But I—I am so sorry he lost his life because of me."

"Why because of you?" Fillmore asked.

"He came back here to clear me in your eyes. That is something only a real man would have done," Ruth said, fighting to restrain her tears. "You would never have believed me, Guy."

The latter reached up and pulled his wife's head down. Shamefacedly and reverently he kissed those quivering lips.

That night they both lay awake thinking of the tragedy. Not until the gray dawn in the east heralded the coming of another day did they drop off into a sound sleep.

Guy Fillmore was first to rise. He stole from the tent and built a fire.

By the time Ruth emerged he had the bacon fried and eggs ready for the pan. But breakfast this morning brought them little comfort. They ate in almost complete silence.

Guy made several attempts to strike up a conversation, but his wife showed no inclination to respond. Her eyes were heavy and she appeared to be nervous.

The only thing that seemed to interest her was the rifle which had been returned to her by the dead outlaw.

While her husband fished she cleaned it thoroughly, and by noon she was in a little better spirits.

It was as they prepared to eat lunch that the officer who killed Carter stalked into their presence. He gave Ruth a peculiar glance, then addressed himself to Fillmore.

"There will be an inquest held in the little town beyond the lake," he said. "I have been sent up here to request you to be present."

Ruth flashed her husband a swift glance. He understood.

"I am sorry I can not comply with your request, sir," Guy said rather stiffly.

"But why not?" the other demanded.

"Because I am not interested in the inquest." Fillmore retorted with a cold smile. "You caught the man and killed him. That ends the matter so far as we are concerned."

The officer hesitated a moment before answering.

"Very well," he said at last. "I can't very well compel you to come, although I thought you would like to make some sort of a statement to the newspapers. Several reporters will be there, and——"

"That is the very thing I want to avoid," Guy interrupted with asperity.

Ruth had turned pale when she heard newspaper reporters mentioned. She knew only too well what it meant if the world was given the facts in this case.

The public would never believe that she escaped unharmed after having been compelled to spend two

nights alone with the outlaw.

She made a quick sign to her husband which he interpreted with correctness. But before he acted upon the impulse that swayed him, the officer said ingratiatingly:

'I don't suppose it would be hard to keep this thing from the newspapers since I am the only one who saw—this lady with Carter."

Guy Fillmore caught the drift of this remark and it angered him. His hand, already in touch with the fat roll of bills in his pocket, was withdrawn. He faced the officer, his shouldelr squared.

"I presume you expect me to pay you for your silence," he declared. "Well, I don't propose to do anything of the kind. There is nothing in this case of which my wife or I have to be ashamed of. Carter took her along to keep her from betraying his presence in this part of the country.

"And she returned to me exactly as she went—if you understand what I am driving at. She——"

"But Carter came back after her," the officer broke in with an ugly grin. "I take it that he came to shoot it out with you for her possession."

"You are absolutely wrong," Ruth spoke up. "He came back to clear me in my husband's eyes."

"That is the truth, sir," Guy supplemented. "And if the newspapers print a different story it will be a deliberate lie. I shall bring suit in such an event and prosecute the offending editor to the limit."

The officer saw that he had struck the wrong keynote in trying to force the American to offer him a bribe which he was eager to accept.

With a bow to Ruth and a curt nod to her husband, he took his departure. But there was a look on his face that was not good to see—a look which boded

mischief.

As he vanished Ruth gave her husband a searching glance.

"I am sorry we offended that officer, Guy," she said. "He'll do us harm if he gets the chance. I wish that——"

"Let him try it." Fillmore broke in. "I don't think he can get away with it."

"I hope not," remarked Ruth devoutly.

Little did they dream what the officer's intentions were. For there was to be a terrible sequel to the affair involving the lovely young Mrs. Fillmore and the outlaw

Chapter 104

THE HOME COMING

CONDITIONS at Oak Manor, the magnificent Gordon estate had changed but little. What time he could spare from his increasing business, Phil gave to directing the movements of private detectives which was to end in the finding of his first wife. The breach between Alice and himself seemed to be constantly growing wider. They rarely met now.

In the presence of company they appeared to be on the best of terms which served to curtail the activities of gossips and scandal mongers.

Alice had long since grown tired of living isolated. And she would probably have insisted upon moving back to the Gordon city home in Chicago, if a certain reason had not made this practically impossible.

She realized with a bitter pang that society showed an inclination to ignore her. From time to time she entertained at Oak Manor, but these events lacked flavor and spice since Phil openly frowned upon them.

Fate, however, took a hand in providing Alice with diversion in the form of a very handsome young man who came to settle down on a neighboring estate.

At the suggestion of an uncle, whose only heir he was, he came to study agriculture in a practical way.

Harold Wayne did not show great enthusiasm in the work assigned to him. He was city-born and bred, and he had become used to the pleasures the city provided.

Utterly lacking the ability to make his own way in the world, his only prospect was the eventual pos-

session of his uncle's estate, and he managed to make rural life endurable by a few flirtations with village belles.

He was invited to Oak Manor by John Procter, a close personal friend of his uncle. The very first moment he laid his eyes on Alice Gordon, he read her smile correctly.

While she appeared rather reserved for a time, his openly admiring attentions did not fail to produce a very favorable impression on her flattery-loving nature, and she found them a pleasant interruption of the dullness which Alice felt was crushing her spirit. He was seen in her company more and more.

If Phil noticed the growing intimacy between Harold Wayne and his wife, he gave no sign of it. Every ounce of his surplus energy was directed to the finding of Marie.

Something within him kept telling him that she was still alive, although he had failed to find the slightest trace of her.

When he was not thinking of his first wife, he thought of his two children. This feeling became more acute every day. Then he received a letter from their governess who stated that the children were homesick.

"Bring them back at once," he wired.

And so the day came when Miss Marie Desmond was to return to Oak Manor with her charges.

Phil was in a state of feverish expectancy. But this was not alone due to his longing for his children. He longed to hear this beautiful young governess' voice. It had always reminded him of the woman he had loved so dearly and lost.

Alice remained utterly indifferent to the prospective return of Miss Desmond and the two children. When Phil first mentioned it to her, she shrugged her shoulders

and remarked sarcastically:

"I suppose you'll be glad to have this pretty governess home again. You always seemed to think a great deal of her."

Phil treated this remark with contemptuous silence. He had long since learned how useless it was to correct his second wife or argue with her.

But he could not resist the shot:

"Miss Desmond is a splendid young woman. And what she has done for my children can not be measured in dollars and cents."

With that he left Alice and gave orders that the nursery as well as the governess' room be thoroughly cleaned and aired.

On the day of their coming, he rose early. Instead of using the chauffeur in driving to the railroad station to meet them, he took the wheel himself.

Phil was ahead of time and began pacing the floor of the waiting room with restless steps.

The heavy rumbling of the train from the south as it drew into the station, and the shrieking of the brakes, told him that his loved ones were near.

He ran down to the train-shed, his eyes scanning the passengers as they alighted. It seemed like an eternity before Marie Desmond appeared with the children.

Harry was first to emerge from the observation car in the rear. With a joyous shout he ran into the arms of his father.

"My boy — my boy!" cried Phil, trembling with emotion.

"Daddy — daddy!" the younster exclaimed, his arms tightening about his father's neck.

"Let me look at you!" gulped Phil. "Why, you are looking fine."

And how true it was. There was no trace of

Harry's former illness. His eyes were bright, and his cheeks had a healthy color. He was full of life and bubbling over with enthusiasm.

"Here is Phyllis!" the boy shouted. "Here she is, dad."

The sweet-faced little girl got the same affectionate greeting from her father.

"How is my baby?" the latter inquired, his voice husky.

"Oh, just fine, daddy," was the instant reply.

And then Harry once more embraced his big dad and for a few moments both of the children were hanging about Phil's neck.

Marie purposely kept in the background for fear that her emotions would be stronger than her self-control. Again she was near the man she loved with every beat of her heart.

She gave him a swift glance. How pale and careworn he looked.

As she perceived him lavishing his affection upon the two children, her eyes filled with tenderness. Ah, he was the same old Phil.

He had always been like that. But in the happy days gone by she had shared in his love.

Then suddenly she saw him come toward her with both hands outstretched. She stood perfectly rigid.

Marie was aware that his gaze traveled swiftly from the sole of her dainty slippers to the crown of her hair. And there was open admiration in that gaze. It was not an easy matter for her to remain calm.

With every ounce of strength she fought against the desire to throw herself into his arms.

"Miss Desmond!" he greeted her happily. "It is a pleasure to see you again."

Marie's confusion increased as he held her hand

a great deal longer than strict propriety warranted. She dropped her eyes demurely.

"I am glad to be back," she said in a whisper.

"This is one of the greatest days of my life, my dear Miss Desmond," Phil told her. "Why, that boy of mine looks simply wonderful. Phyllis has grown three inches, I believe, and you look as though the southern climate agreed with you."

"We had a splendid trip, Mr. Gordon," she answered in a low tone. "I think it was well worth the expense if we are to judge by Harry's wonderful improvement."

Phil smiled at her.

"Yes, I agree with you fully," he told her. "But what is money compared with my boy's health? There was a time when I would have gladly given every dollar I possessed to make him well again. The expense connected with your stay in the south was trifling."

Marie did not make a response. Somehow Phil's prolonged stare into her swimming eyes made her feel uneasy.

She was glad when he suggested leaving the station. She lifted the boy on the front seat of the car, while she sat in the rear with Phyllis and Annie. The trip to Oak Manor did not take long.

Phil kept chatting with his little son, who occassionally turned to her for conformation of something he told.

At Oak Manor a pleasant surprise awaited them. All the servants with the exception of Nora Evans were grouped on the front terrace. Among them was old John Procter and Bob Harding.

A glad shout went up as the party climbed out of the car. The children received a hearty hug from every one of the servants.

Afterwards they were led into the house. Marie was introduced to Harding by Phil, who hurriedly explained the young man's presence.

She was not a little amazed when she heard that he was old Mr. Procter's son-in-law.

"I am so glad to know you," she said, smiling pleasantly into Bob's eyes.

"I am more than glad to know you, Miss Desmond," the latter responded heartily. "I have heard so much about you."

"Is that so?" she inquired archly. "And who has been talking about me?"

"I have," Mr. Procter confessed.

"Oh, then it is alright," Marie laughed charmingly. "You are my friend."

"You bet I am," declared the old gentleman.

There was, however, an element of mental diffidence in the atmosphere which was due solely to the absence of the mistress of the house.

Alice had made herself conspicious by deliberately failing to join the others who welcomed the children and their governess home.

Phil was first to notice this and a frown darkened his brow.

While he expected that his second wife would refuse to take part in any demonstration for his children and Miss Desmond, he did not believe her so utterly devoid of tact.

From the window of her boudoir Alice had been watching the arrival of the family limousine. There was a sneer on her lips as Phil lifted both of the children to the ground and kissed them.

But her features grew ugly with positive hatred when he assisted the governess from the car with the grace of a cavalier of the old school.

The way he smiled at this beautiful woman a roused the devil within her. What if she had known tha this Marie Desmond was none other than Marie Gordon Phil's first wife?

She was always conscious of the fact that she had failed utterly in regaining her husband's love. At times she wondered if she ever possessed it.

But she vowed with all the vindictiveness of which she was capable that no other woman should have him

Ever since her coming to Oak Manor, this Miss Desmond had been the recipient of many favors from Phil. Yes, upon several occasions he had taken the part of the governess against her.

So while Alice, in her self-imposed solitude, became prey to the most disagreeable thoughts and vicious plans, the woman she hated was accorded the welcome as one of the family.

The noon luncheon was a jolly affair. Again Alice remained in her boudoir, having sent word that she was suffering with a headache.

Old John Procter had laid aside the usual anxiety about the whereabouts of his youngest daughter. With the two happy Gordon children seated beside him, he seemed to get genuine pleasure out of their constant chatter.

On the other side of the table sat Phil between Marie and Bob Harding. If either of these three had some mental disturbance, they gave no sign of it.

A feeling of peacefulness had taken a hold of Gordon. He listened with eagerness to every word the lovely governess said. And he became aware that she looked at him occasionally with a strange expression in her eyes.

Instinctively he felt himself drawn to this unfathomable woman. At times her low laugh and the sound

of her voice startled him.

And then, when he gave her a quick, questionable glance, she would turn away.

Marie had a secure hold on herself. Most of her conversation was directed at Bob Harding, whose sympathetic, handsome features and obvious modesty appealed strongly to her.

And when, after the luncheon was over and they were seated on the grounds under a shady tree, he told her his story, the young automobile mechanic grew by leaps and bounds in her estimation.

All the secret sorrow of his soul he expressed in simple language.

"Something tells me that you will find your wife before long," she said encouragingly. "Don't lose heart, my dear boy."

"I am not losing heart," Bob declared stoutly. "I will not give up the search. And isn't it strange that Phil Gordon, who is my brother-in-law by marriage, should also be searching for someone who is near and dear to him?

"I suppose you know that Alice is his second wife," he chatted on. "But I don't believe he ever had the least affection for her. He——"

"You must pardon me if I refuse to discuss Mrs. Gordon's private affairs," Marie interrupted, her pale face averted. "You see, I am not a member of the Gordon family. I am merely a servant."

Bob Harding colored up.

"You are right," he admitted ruefully. "But," he added with conviction, "you are as good as one of the family. Mr. Procter speaks of you in the highest terms. And unless I am much mistaken, Phil's interest in you is deeper than ——"

Again Marie interrupted the speaker.

"You must be mistaken," she said with assumed coldness when she could have hugged this well-meaning, honest young fellow. "I am nothing to Mr. Gordon. I can never mean anything to him. Wrong conclusions often lead to embarrassing situations."

"I guess they do," said Bob, although he was not quite clear as to what Miss Desmond meant.

Chapter 105

THE BREATH OF SLANDER.

THE HARROWING experience the young Fillmore couple had in the wilds of the Canadian forest was one not easily forgotten. During their trip back to New York little mention was made of it. Once or twice Ruth referred to the outlaw who held her captive two successive nights, but she changed the subject quickly when she saw the dark frown upon her husband's face.

It seemed that Guy was more anxious to forget it than she. But he never betrayed by a single word or a move that he secretly worried about the affair.

He was in deadly fear that the matter would be given publicity in the newspapers because it contained a decidedly sensational aspect.

While he thoroughly believed that Ruth had escaped harm at the hands of the outlaw, the newspaper reading public would draw its own conclusions.

Even his own personal friends, he felt, would accept the story at its face value..

Guy Fillmore knew human nature too well. Indeed, he did. Experience had taught him that the worst possible motive is always assigned to an affair which involves a pretty young married woman and a man who is not her husband.

And the man with whom Ruth had come in touch had been an outlaw—— a man shunned and despised by all decent society.

With feverish anxiety he read every newspaper offered for sale. Canadian papers he went after most

particularly.

He was in constant dread of coming across some article which read like this:

"Beautiful young wife of New York clubman kidnapped in Canadian woods and held captive by outlaw for forty-eight hours."

Such a heading alone would instantly attract the lovers of sensational reading matter.

And every man or woman who read it would at once take it for granted that Ruth did not come back to him the same woman as she had left.

For evil minds will quickly give birth to evil and vicious thoughts.

Guy Fillmore shuddered at the mere thought of having his friends and the public in general believe that his lovely young wife had been the plaything—— the mistress of an outlaw.

But there seemed to be no cause for alarm.

Every newspaper he had read so far, never mentioned Ruth's dreadful experience.

From the eventful trip into the Canadian wilds the Fillmores at last arrived at their cozy home in New-York. They were apparently in the best of spirits. They chose to ignore the past.

Guy at once returned to his desk and worked harder than ever.

Besides being the advertising manager of a great theatrical syndicate, he was making his initial debut as a playwright.

He had been engaged to write a play for one of Belasco's most brilliant stars. This was quite a feather in his cap.

By nearly all the theatrical men young Fillmore was regarded as a sure comer. His rise since maging his permanent residence in the big city on the Hudson, had

been meteoric.

Ruth had indeed cause to feel happy and proud. Except for an occasional inclination to jealousy, Guy Fillmore was a perfect husband.

In every letter she wrote to her brother, she spoke of her husband in the most glowing terms.

And Phil Gordon, reading these letters, hoped fervently that his only sister would remain as happy as she now apparently was.

But human happiness is a delicate thing.

Human happiness is always at the mercy of the thing called: "Fate." And we are not always ourselves to blame when grief and sorrow come.

Neither could any particular fault be attached to the Fillmores when the pedestal upon which they had placed one another began to waver, with a promise of crashing to the floor.

It began about four weeks after the young couple returned from the vacation in the Canadian mountains. It came like a bolt from a clear sky.

Guy, as was his wont, took luncheon at the fashionable club of which he was a member. He liked this particular club because he used to meet so many of his friends there.

And after luncheon he enjoyed playing a game of billiard or poker.

On this particular day he happened to be rather late. Most of his cronies had already finished eating their lunch and had gone to the card room.

Fillmore was in one of his best moods, and not at all in a hurry.

But he became a little disturbed when he noticed that several of the diners glanced him now and then in a most peculiar manner. At first he thought that the fault lay with himself, and he grinned.

However, the fault did not lay with himself as he soon learned.

"What is the matter with those fellows?" he commented mentally. "Have I become some sort of a freak or curiosity?"

Well, these men were only casual acquaintances. If they enjoyed staring at him, he did not object He smiled broadly.

It was his intention to dally at the club until two-o'clock, when he was to meet his wife and take her to one of the best shows.

Consulting his watch, he saw that it was just one o'clock. That gave him a whole hour with his cronies in the card room.

The day before they had trimmed him unmercifully in a game of poker. But he had hopes of getting even during the next hour.

Lighting a cigar, he sauntered nonchallantly psat those who still stared at him. He entered the reading room. Here he noticed that his presence also aroused curiosity. He swallowed his chagrin as best he could. He wanted to laugh it off and couldn't.

Then his mental disturbance rose to anger.

"The devil with those fellows!" he growled, and passed into the card room.

The usual crowd was seated at one of the tables. The rattle of chips greeted him.

"Hello, Guy!" cried one of the men.

"Hello!" Fillmore returned.

Suddenly he stopped.

What caused him to do this, was the fact that only one man had spoken to him. The usual chorus of "hellos" was missing. What was the meaning of this cool reception?

Then he saw something that had escaped his ob-

servation before. One of the men was in the act of reading something from a newspaper, which he hastily put in his pocket when he perceived Fillmore.

He walked up to the man and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"What's up, Tom?" he inquired.

"Nothing at all," the other replied in a manner which clearly indicated that he was not telling the exact truth. "Oh, nothing at all."

Guy glanced about and studied the other faces for a long moment. There were six men engaged in playing poker. He knew them all by their first names. They were his friends.

He was greatly puzzled when not a single one of them showed an inclination to talk or even look at him. No one asked him to sit in the game.

Then all of a sudden one man burst into harsh.discordant laugh.

An attempt was made to hush him, but the offender paid no heed. As a matter of fact he kept on laughing and it began to look as if he might be under the influence of strong drink.

He stared straight at Fillmore as he exclaimed in a raucous voice:

"Some experience you had up there in Canada, old man. Some experience, I dare say."

Fillmore turned pale.

"Why —— why!" he stammered. "What do you know about it?"

"Let him see the paper, Tom," the heedless one retorted.

Tom made no move to comply. He shot the speaker an angry glance. Fillmore saw it and his blood began to boil.

"If there is something in that paper which con-

cerns me, I would like to read it," he said, trying with all his might to keep himself under control. "Tom, will you not oblige me?"

The newspaper was handed over reluctantly.

Guy did not have to search very long. On the first page he found the article he dreaded.

In large black type the heading announced that Mrs. Ruth Fillmore had been kidnapped by an outlaw named "Carter" in the Canadian mountains, and that she had been held an unwilling prisoner for two days and two nights.

The article which followed was rather lengthy, and also thoroughly explanatory.

Guy Fillmore's heart almost stopped beating as he read to the very end. There were certain little hints that held a subtle suggestion. And these suggestions conveyed the idea he dreaded.

The closing scene of his stay in Canada rushed back to his mind.

Again he saw the officer standing ther with that much-meaning grin on his face. Again he could hear the words the man spoke.

Fillmore had refused to buy this man's silence, although he had suggested that a newspaper reporter would be present at the inquest which followed the outlaw's killing.

His first thought was that he had blundered.

Guy swore softly under his breath. He realized now, when it was too late, the fatal consequences of his stubborness.

"Too bad," he heard one of his friends say very sympathetically. "Too bad, Guy, old man. But at least you have the satisfaction of knowing that the brute is no longer alive. He was killed as he deserved to be. They should have given you a chance to put a bullet through

his miserable carcass."

Fillmore's breath whistled through his teeth. He lost control of himself completely.

"Why, what the hell are you thinking about?" he shouteed, trembling with fury.

"I am thinking of how you must have felt when your wife returned after having been in the clutches of such a man," the other retorted.

Guy ran to the other side of the table and confronted the speaker.

"You are crazy if you believe that he —— that my wife — that —— " He could not go any further because every face before him wore a grin that was terrifying. He glared at them for a long moment, then burst out:

"The hell with all of you!"

No one made an attempt to stop him when he wheeled and stalked from the room.

Guy Fillmore's state of mind could not easily be described. Evidently every one of his friends at the club took it for granted that Ruth had been the outlaw's toy during her captivity.

This was a hard thing to face.

"Oh, God!" he groaned as he slouched on the seat of the taxi that was taking him home. "I might have expected it. No power on earth could convince those fellows that my wife returned to me absolutely unharmed. But they don't realize that they are putting a frightful mark on her. "

But in the same breath the poor man became convinced more and more that this was exactly what he had to expect.

It was the way men thought these days.

Silently he cursed the day he set out for the Canadian mountains. He cursed the circumstances which

had brought Ruth in touch with the outlaw.

In his impotent rage and boundless chagrin he began to curse his wife and himself. For he knew that from this day on the woman he had married stood convicted of having belonged to another man.

By the time he reached his apartment his fury had become dangerous.

Ruth was in her boudolr. She had just finished dressing and stood before the mirror adjusting her very modish hat.

When she saw her husband come in, his features ashen and his shoulders sagging, she wheeled upon him and uttered a scream of fright.

"Guy —— Guy!" she cried, running to meet him. "What has happened."

Without a word he took the newspaper with the damning article from his pocket and flung it on the dressing table with a motion of disgust.

"What —— What is it?" Ruth demanded.

"Read for yourself!" he snarled.

Ruth snatched up the paper.

Her eyes dilated as she began to read the dreadful article. Horror seized her as she caught the hidden meaning of it all.

"But it is not true, dear!" she wailed.

"Isn't it?" He stred at her stupidly.

"No, it is not, Guy, and you know it. The man who inspired this article ought to be killed. It is malicious slander of the worst type."

"So it is ," Fillmore agreed glumly. "But what are we going to do about it?"

Ruth stared at him.

"Do about it?" she shrilled. "You must write a statement to the newspapers."

Continued in next number

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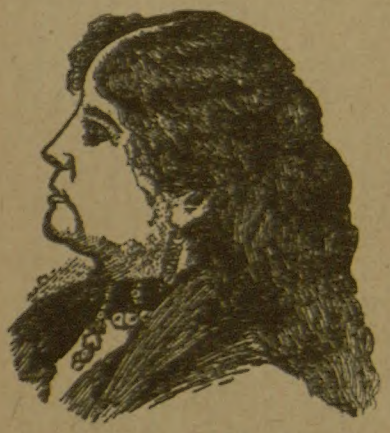

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